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ABSTRACT

During the 1972 presidential election campaign, both Senator McGovern and President Nixon used the longer, documentary-type, paid announcements of five-, fifteen-, or thirty-minutes in length. Critics asserted that the shorter spots did not allow enough time for the voters to learn substantive information about the candidates. A telephone survey of 743 voters in central California, conducted the weekend before the election, however, revealed that the new media strategies utilized by both candidates did not impart adequate information to the public. This lends credence to the idea that the media strategy itself is not the critical variable; instead, the content of the message is still most important, no matter how it is presented. Longer commercials seem to offer little benefit to the voters in terms of additional information on which to make their political choices. (EE)

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POLITICAL ADVERTISING AND THE 1972 CAMPAIGN:

A COMMUNICATION FAILURE

by

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It was just a little over 20 years ago that advertising agency executive Rosser Reeves suggested Dwight Eisenhower use television spots during his 1952 Presidential campaign. Reeves (1952) felt that television spots, this "new way of campaigning," would deliver more listeners for less money than any other form of advertising. And "because they are simple, because they are quick, because they are short and uncomplicated, the public will remember them."

This use of political ads proved so popular that they have become a standard tool of the campaigner during the past two decades. And while they have become a familiar part of our political campaigns, they have not become an accepted one. Critics note that the use of spots often plays a role in disrupting the political campaign.

Nimmo (1970) feels that spots enable professional managers to communicate images and impressions more effectively than facts or reasoned judgments, while Liston (1970) adds that they give the public "a marketed, cleverly packaged, highly polished and extremely slick rendition" of the candidate and his views.

This criticism of spots has led to an important question dealing with advertising effectiveness: Can a 30- or 60-second political commercial prove an adequate tool for presenting a candidate's views to the voters? On the one hand, a number of empirical studies have found that voters do indeed learn factual information from spot television commercials. Bowen, Atkin, Nayman and Sheinkopf (1971, 1973) concluded that "candidate qualifications and issue positions seemed to be the most widely learned material from political ads." They noted that this finding was inconsistent with much of the critical commentary regarding the effectiveness of political advertising, yet the majority of their respondents felt they had acquired "hard" information rather than more personal

factors such as familiarity with the candidate as a person.

In a related study, Sheinkopf, Atkin and Bowen (1972, 1973) noted that a specific subgroup of the public, campaign workers, actually sought out political messages as a source of information on candidate qualifications and issue positions. The majority of party workers studied were found to use television advertisements as an information source for subsequent persuasion attempts, finding ideas and arguments to use when interacting with the public.

Many critics, however, have asserted that the new "image politics," represented by the spot announcement, may actually interfere with the basic notion of a representative democracy requiring a well-informed electorate. McGinniss (1969) says that advertising men "sold" Richard Nixon to the American public via high-powered, image-building commercials. Weiss (1971) notes that in the new type of campaigning, voters focus their attention on the candidate's appearance, manner, and style of presentation. This is similar to Wyckoff's (1968) argument that "electoral engineers" can manufacture a "manipulated reality" to produce image candidates. Finally, Mendelsohn and Crespi (1970) state that today's political campaigns find high-powered promotion displacing the less passionate approaches, greatly changing current political campaigns.

John O'Toole, president of Foote, Cone, and Belding, has been conducting a crusade against political spots for the past year. He feels that these brief commercials defy a discussion of the issues, while they encourage "shallow imagery, shoddy logic, reprehensible mud slinging" (Weiss, 1973). O'Toole's answer to the problem is to limit commercials to a five-minute minimum length, and thus totally ban the shorter spot announcement. Not all advertising executives agree, however. A study by Sheinkopf (1972) found only 20 percent

of the respondents (advertising agency presidents) agreeing that a minimum time limit such as five minutes would improve the campaign standards and discussion.

However, as shown during the recent Presidential campaign, there appears to be a trend away from the shorter spot commercial toward the five-minute ad and the even longer half-hour political program. A report in Broadcasting (Nov. 13, 1972) noted that the several Nixon campaign committees ran nearly twice as many network ads of five-minute and half-hour length than the traditional 60-second spot announcements, while McGovern's media buyers chose 58 of the longer network commercials and only 36 of the shorter spots. Specifically, Broadcasting noted there were 40 Nixon 60-second commercials on the network, as opposed to 74 of the five-minute spots and four half-hour paid political programs. McGovern's 36 one-minute spots were aired along with 49 five-minute network announcements and nine half-hour political programs.

The change in political announcements last year, then, from the traditional short spot to the longer commercial announcement, provided an opportunity to assess the effects of longer announcements on the public. Specifically, since many critics feel that voters do not learn factual information from shorter spots, it was decided to measure information gain in the context of the new media strategies.

Method: Forty-five students in an upper-division advertising class at Florida Technological University were selected and trained in the use and administration of the telephone questionnaire. Nearly 1,000 names were randomly drawn from the

questionnaire was designed to measure voter knowledge of campaign i[illegible]d candidate stances on these issues.

Orlando/Winter Park and other Central Florida telephone directories, and a questionnaire was designed to measure voter knowledge of campaign issues and candidate stances on these issues.

Actual data collection was conducted between Friday noon and 10 p.m., Sunday during the weekend immediately preceeding the election (Tuesday, November 7). A total of 743 usable schedules were completed during this interviewing period. All interviews were conducted with the first eligible voter available at each household, with the average interview taking approximately seven minutes to complete.

Hypotheses: A number of hypotheses were formulated, dealing with voter knowledge of candidate stances on issues, and their perceptions of the campaign in general. In view of the new media strategies used during the 1972 campaign, we expected that:

H1: Television is the single most important news source for information about national politics.

H2: Although most voters are interested in a Presidential race, most of them do not know at least three of the major campaign issues.

H3: Those best informed on political issues receive their information from a print rather than a broadcast source.

H4: Younger rather than older voters tend to seek information from broadcast media.

H5: Few voters make a conscious effort to avoid political advertising.

H6: Voters feel they perceive little or no information from political announcements.

Findings: The first hypothesis, that television would prove to be the single most important source for news about national politics, was confirmed. Forty-seven percent of the respondents reported television as their primary source, with newspapers second with 30 percent. Magazines and radio were rated far down the scale of importance, with magazines cited by only four percent and radio by three percent of the respondents. About 14 percent of those interviewed were unable to cite one primary source but said they used multiple sources of information.

The second hypothesis, that most persons would be unable to name at least three important campaign issues, was also confirmed. In order to obtain as accurate a response as possible and to avoid helping respondents in their answers, those interviewed were not supplied with a list of possible issues but were asked to name those items which concerned them most.

As table 1 shows, Vietnam was the most important issue on the public's mind, with the state of the economy a distant second. And as the table clearly shows, a majority of the respondents, 60.4 percent, were unable to name a third issue which they felt was important in the Presidential contest. Despite the Watergate affair, the issue of amnesty and the concern over inflation, apparently in most people's minds there was not too much for them to become personally concerned about.

The third hypothesis stated that those best informed would have received their information from a printed instead of a broadcast source. Table 2 shows this indeed was the case. Those persons who were able to discuss various issues concerning the race and who based their statements on knowledge about the issues rather than simply likeability for their candidate were deemed the better informed.

An interesting pattern emerged in comparative source importance when a study was made of the media used for each issue discussed. Those discussing one issue, which was the largest group in the sample (table 1), clearly favored TV news shows. But as respondents were questioned about a greater number of issues, preference for print media became clearly evident, so much so that those who had exhibited knowledge of a third issue cited a print source, and newspapers in particular, as their media of information.

The hypothesis that younger rather than older people would tend to seek information from broadcast media was not borne out. As table 3 shows, people of all ages cited broadcast media for their primary information source on the issue that concerned them most. And while for the second issue those falling into the 56 and over age category did report the newspapers as their primary source, when it came to the third issue this distinction no longer existed. Thus for the past Presidential race, the broadcast media served as the main source of information for all age groups.

The fifth hypothesis concerning lack of avoidance of political advertising was confirmed. Few persons said that they made any conscious effort to avoid political advertising from either party. Table 4 shows that Nixon supporters were slightly more inclined to ignore McGovern advertising, and that a number of supporters for both candidates even ignored their own candidate's advertising. The table also illustrates that those not in favor of either candidate were also not receptive to their advertising.

Most of the respondents claimed to gain little or no real knowledge about the qualifications of both candidates from TV advertising, as the sixth hypothesis predicted. McGovern supporters claimed they gained more knowledge

about their candidate from his advertising than Nixon supporters, but the percentage was not large (table 5). Even with the use of longer messages most people still felt they did not gain much real information from the commercials. Table 2 adds further reinforcement to this finding: few respondents cited TV advertising as their source of information about the issues they felt most important in the campaign.

Conclusions: It would appear that despite the change in media strategy for the 1972 Presidential campaign, political advertising did not have a significant impact on the general public. Those interviewed claimed they relied primarily on news accounts of the different candidates to supply the information on which to base their voting decision.

Perhaps the most important finding of the study is the matter of voter knowledge about different issues. It has been assumed in recent years that since most voters rely primarily on television for their national and international news, television naturally would also be the most important source from which knowledge about issues had been gained. This was not so for those persons most knowledgeable about the election; instead, they relied heavily on the print media, and the newspaper in particular.

Thus, it would seem that the newspaper is a much more important source of information than many strategists have believed. The ability to study at one's own leisure a politician's stands and beliefs is an important ingredient that broadcasting cannot provide. Campaign strategists would do well to take note.

Along with this, it appears that there was a severe communication failure during the recent campaign. Following several years of criticism and debate

about the effects of television spots, the various media strategists turned to a new type of media schedule in 1972. The traditional spot was little used in favor of the longer television announcement and paid political program. The goal of this new strategy is obvious: longer commercials could obviously impart more information than could shorter spots.

Yet voters still did not seem to be well-versed on the issues of the campaign. The 1972 race was one marked by several clear issues -- the break-in at Watergate; the continuing war in Vietnam; debate over the granting of amnesty to deserters and draft-dodgers, and the other perennial campaign issues -- the economy, inflation, welfare and social security, etc. Adding these issues together with the new media strategy seems to indicate that voters should have been aware of the campaign topics. But 35 percent of the respondents were unable to name three of these issues -- and 65 percent could not name even <u>two</u> of them!

It thus appears that the advertisements used by Nixon and McGovern in the recent race did a poor job of informing the voters about the issues and specific facts and information. Certainly the voter could choose to avoid news programs or articles, but the many television commercials come to the voter involuntarily, and are much more difficult to avoid (though few attempted to avoid the ads). This lends credence to the idea that the media strategy itself is not the critical variable. Instead, the content of the message is still most important, no matter how it is presented. Longer commercials seem to offer little benefit to the voters in terms of information on which to make their political choices.

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Table 1

Percent of Respondents Citing Various Issues

Topics	Those Citing First Issue	Those Citing Second Issue	Those Citing Third Issue
Nothing	12.8%	35.0%	60.4%
Vietnam	57.6	11.8	3.5
Amnesty	0.5	0.5	0.4
Watergate	0	0.5	0.3
Economy	10.6	22.5	8.6
Domestic Problems	2.4	10.4	10.4
Welfare/ Social Security	1.6	6.9	5.7
Candidates themselves	3.2	1.1	0.8
Other	11.3	11.3	9.9
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 2

Sources of Political Information Cited by Persons Knowledgeable About Issues, by Percent

Media Cited	Source of First Issue	Source of Second Issue	Source of Third Issue	Total Mean Category Average
TV News	56.0%	47.0%	16.0%	39.3
Radio News	3.5	2.5	1.3	2.4
Radio Advertising	0.5	0.5	0	0.5
Campaign Literature	0.5	1.5	0	1.0
Newspaper Stories	30.0	40.0	68.0	46.0
TV Advertising	5.0	3.0	4.0	4.0
Newspaper Advertising	0.5	1.0	0	0.5
Direct Mail	1.0	0.5	1.7	1.0
Magazine Stories	3.0	4.0	9.0	5.3
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0

Table 3

Age Groups Citing Media Preference According to Number of Issues Discussed, by Percent

THOSE DISCUSSING
FIRST ISSUE

Media Cited	Under 35	36-55	56 and over
TV News	63.0%	54.0%	50.0%
Radio News	2.0	2.0	3.0
Radio Advertising	0	0	1.0
Campaign Literature	2.0	2.0	0
Newspaper Stories	25.0	35.5	41.0
TV Advertising	3.0	3.0	2.0
Newspaper Advertising	1.0	1.0	0
Direct Mail	1.0	0.5	1.0
Magazine Stories	3.0	2.0	2.0
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

continued

Table 3 (continued)

THOSE DISCUSSING
SECOND ISSUE

Media Cited	Under 35	36-55	56 and over
TV News	56.0%	48.0%	37.5%
Radio News	2.5	1.0	4.5
Radio Advertising	0.5	0	0
Campaign Literature	2.0	2.0	0
Newspaper Stories	34.0	41.5	47.5
TV Advertising	1.5	4.5	3.0
Newspaper Advertising	0.5	0	1.5
Direct Mail	0.5	0.5	1.5
Magazine Stories	2.5	2.5	4.5
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

THOSE DISCUSSING
THIRD ISSUE

Media Cited	Under 35	36-55	56 and over
TV News	54.5%	51.0%	47.0%
Radio News	4.0	2.0	4.0
Radio Advertising	0	0	0
Campaign Literature	0	0	0
Newspaper Stories	31.0	39.0	47.0
TV Advertising	4.5	2.0	0
Newspaper Advertising	0	1.0	0
Direct Mail	1.0	1.0	0
Magazine Stories	5.0	4.0	2.0
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 4

Avoidance of Political Advertising by Different Political Groups

	"Did you attempt to avoid Nixon's political advertising?"	"Did you attempt to avoid McGovern's political advertising?"
Nixon supporters		
YES	9.8%	27.0%
NO	90.2	73.0
	100.0%	100.0%
McGovern supporters		
YES	25.6%	8.0%
NO	74.4	92.0
	100.0%	100.0%
Supporters of others		
YES	40.0%	32.0%
NO	60.0	68.0
	100.0%	100.0%

Table 5

Information Perceived Gained from TV Political Advertising

"How much did you learn about Nixon's qualifications from his political ads on TV?"

	Nixon supporters	McGovern supporters	Supporters of others
NOTHING	39.2%	50.5%	50.0%
A LITTLE	39.0	34.0	37.5
A LOT	21.8	15.5	12.5
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

"How much did you learn about McGovern's qualifications from his political ads on TV?"

	Nixon supporters	McGovern supporters	Supporters of others
NOTHING	42.6%	22.1%	29.2%
A LITTLE	32.8	44.2	58.3
A LOT	24.6	33.7	12.5
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%